and thereafter in the Standing Committee of some Union Ministers and Chief Ministers which was set up pursuant to the recommendations made in the Conference of Chief Ministers. The Standing Committee has suggested that the Essential Commodities Act, 1955 may continue as an umbrella legislation for the Centre and the States to use when needed, but a progressive dismantling of controls and restrictions was also required.

Pakistan's objection to Indo-Israel cooperation

2697. SHRI K. RAMA MOHANA RAO: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have noticed that Pakistan has objected to defence cooperation between India and Israel;

(b) if so, the details in this regard; and

(c) what has been Israel's response to Pakistan's objection?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI JASWANT SINGH): (a) to (c) Pakistani officials have, from time to time, sought to make propagandist statements about the nature of the legitimate cooperation between India and Israel which is based on national interest and sovereign decision making in both countries. India determines the nature of its relations with other countries solely on the basis of its supreme national interest.

Consulate of Gulf Countries in Kerala

2698. SHRI N.K. PREMACHANDRAN: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether any proposal to start a consulate of Gulf countries in Kerala is pending;

(b) whether any representation/demand for the same has been received from Kerala; and

(c) The details in this regard and Governments reaction thereto?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI JASWANT SINGH): (a) No, Sir.

(b) Yes, Sir.

(c) The Government of Oman proposed to appoint an Honorary Consul to the State of Kerala. This proposal was referred to by the Chief Minister of Kerala in his letter of 24th December, 2001 to the Minister of External Affairs. After examination the proposal was not agreed to.

Indo-U.S. defence cooperation

2699. DR. KARAN SINGH:
SHRI AIMADUDDIN AHMED KHAN (DURRU):

Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether during the recent visit of the Prime Minister, talks were held for expanding defence cooperation between India and the U.S. and establishing a new strategic framework;

(b) if so, the outcome of the talks; and

(c) the steps taken in pursuance thereof?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI JASWANT SINGH): (a) During Prime Minister's visit to Washington D.C. in November, 2001, he discussed with the U.S. President ways to qualitatively transform India-U.S. relations in pursuit of their many common goals in Asia and beyond. In this context, they welcomed, *inter-alia*, resumption of bilateral defence cooperation and agreed to enhance consultations on the New Strategic Framework of the United States that was unveiled by President Bush in May, 2001.

(b) The two sides have since taken a number of steps to strengthen mutually beneficial defence cooperation. Raksha Mantri paid a reciprocal visit to the United States in January, 2002 at the invitation of the U.S. Defence Secretary. The bilateral Defence Policy Group (DPG) that had been held in abeyance since May, 1998, met in New Delhi in December, 2001 to exchange views on international security affairs as also to promote India-U.S. military-military contacts, defence supplies and technical cooperation in defence production. Following the DPG meeting, the Executive Steering Groups of